



## RELEVANCE OF MYTH IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN LITERATURE

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### ABSTRACT

Literature has always shown profound interest and fascination for mythology. But the last two decades have witnessed a surge in writers going back to mythology and incorporating them in their works. Myths are an important link between the past and the present, forging a bridge between our ancestors and our modern selves. There has been a lot of discussion recently on the use or rather blend of mythology within various genres of literature, particularly fiction. Questions have been raised on the use of myths, their benefits and relevance of mythology in the current times. Myths are being continually adapted and re-adapted, because there is something about them that is culturally relevant and relatable to modern thought. Employment of myths, in the present literary scenario goes beyond merely using mythological motives for artistic purposes. Rather, it can provide a new and powerful means of expressing the oppression and alienation of humanity and the spiritual crisis of modern society.

**KEYWORDS:** Myths, universality, retelling, literature

### INTRODUCTION

Myths are usually understood as traditional value systems which may or may not have a base in reality. However, its strong claim to universality and timelessness makes it dynamic, which has the potency of constituting realities and different values in a society. They account for various explanations for different societal phenomena. In simpler terms, they are stories that live through generations propagating themselves as a model for governance. It is rooted in religious beliefs and the world order of superstition. They constitute tales of mythic characters and their supernatural world that defies any plausible explanation. Myths can also be thought of as "traditional story in a pre-literate society dealing with supernatural beings, ancestors and heroes that serve as types in a primitive view of the world, myth is also the creation of an evolved, literate culture constituted many a time of fictions or half-truths forming part of the ideology of a society: a notion based more on tradition or conveniences than fact." One of the eminent mythic critics, Robert Graves says that myth has two main functions: first it answers the awkward questions asked by children such as who made the world? How will it end? Secondly, it justifies the existing social order and the prevalence of traditional value systems and customs.

The inevitability of myths and their transformative potential in determining the continuity of societies have been well-established among many academic debates. It has continued to influence many disciplines across countries ranging from literature, linguistics, philosophy, history, sociology, and anthropology. To understand its interdisciplinarity, the example of historical studies may be taken. The significance of history is highlighted through its ability to document the beginnings, materiality, ordering, and evolution of certain modes of existence and certain realities. Histories, as we understood earlier, were documents of different facts confounding objective realities. The inclusion of newer ways of historicizing multiple facets of an evolving world and different societies has allowed historians to analyse myths, folktales, songs, oral narratives etc. to understand societies in a better way. This shift or rather an attempt to open up multiple perspectives centring the functioning of the societies places myths among many other important tools for the understanding of the wider consciousness. Myths not only trace the continuity of historical memories but also highlights the radical potential of the ordering of societies. Having discussed the importance of myths in contributing to the investigation of different histories, it is imperative to look at their relevance in shaping contemporary literature.

Myth is among many recipes that contribute to the production of great literatures. Writers like S.T. Coleridge, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, Lord Byron, Margaret Atwood, Chitra Banerjee Devakaruni, Amish Tripathi, Raja Rao, Shashi Tharoor, and Devdutt Patnaik to name a few have beautifully included myths in their own interpretations. The inclusion of different myths reifies its timelessness and its claim of universality. Myths have been central to the creative process of many prolific writers. Kiran Budkuley, in her essay *Mahabharata Myths in Contemporary Writings: Challenging Ideology* writes, "this preoccupation with myth—whether to create a new one or to reconstruct the old—can be gauged by understanding the relation between the authorial intent behind myths and their functionality as cultural documents within a continually 'shifting' societal reality." To illustrate the creative process of a writer through the archetypal representations of different mythic figures with newer perspectives, she further writes, "In creating a new myth, an author puts his/her own intention to work through the myth visualised, whereas, in the case of re-construction of extant myths, the pal-

pable functions embodied within the original myth are questioned, challenged, substituted, negated, reversed or re-focused." Taking a cue from Budkuley, let us examine a few texts written by Indian writers to understand the politics of using myths and their implications in their writings.

Myth and literature are inextricably linked with each other. However, even though both can't be reduced to each other, their existence is contingent upon their mutual dependence. Myth provides a plethora of stories for the creative process deployed in the production of literary pieces. Literature takes these stories and moulds them into different narrative structures, that allow for a proliferation of new ideas associated with myths. The etymology of myth suggests that it is derived from the Greek word *mythos* meaning 'speech, narrative, fiction, myth, plot' which are very integral to fictional narratives. Northrop Frye calls myth 'a structural organizing principle of literary form.' These two aspects of myth call for a deeper understanding of myth, as a motif and a significant part of literature. While myths existed in oral forms, literature provides a fertile ground for the dissemination of knowledge associated with myths to the globalised world.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her two novels *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantress* presents a feminist interpretation of existing Myths of Mahabharata and Ramayana. In *The Palace of Illusions*, the novelist deconstructs the monolithic understanding of myth, which is usually gendered, casteist, and has sanctity associated with itself. Banerjee believes that the retelling of the myths allows one to venture into the unimagined territory that addresses silences, erasures, and agency in the existing myths. The retelling also points to the shifting points of view within the narrative structure. *The Palace of Illusions* revolves around the grand Indian epic *The Mahabharata*. In her novel, the writer gives voice to Panchali, the wife of the legendary five Pandava brothers. The mythical tale presents a docile position to Panchali and the retelling accords her greater agency. The novel charts out Panchali's life from the very beginning documenting her magical birth. As she was birthed from fire, there were speculations that she would mark a change in the course of history. By making Panchali the protagonist of the novel, the writer allows us to enter into the interiors of her life and presents the mythic world of Mahabharata through a female perspective. She also raises pertinent questions such as what does it mean to be a woman in a world full of men? How does the narrative change when a woman retells the same story? What is the politics of such labour? And what is to narrate from a privileged vantage point? The novel is a feminist interpretation of sacred texts that assumes authenticity and superiority over many marginal voices within the text. Its main politics lies in the re-imagining of a sacred text that enables the subaltern voices to claim the agency denied throughout history. *The Forest of Enchantress* takes a similar recourse while foretelling the grand narrative of Ram and Sita. The novel draws our special attention to the character of Sita, who is represented as a woman without voice and agency. Her depiction in Ramayana resembles that of a Damsel in distress. On the contrary, the novel subverts her docile and mild personality. Divakaruni's Sita has endurance and is a strong character who doesn't ascribe to the violent nature of resentment and protest. Her silence, according to the writer need not be understood as passivity but as a means of protest that defies order and language. Sita, in the novel, is a character who stands with her family and withstands all the trials and tribulations with much rigour and courage in her own ways. She is indomitable and full of strength. The novelist through her writing tries to unravel the misconstruction of Sita's womanhood who is perceived as submissive and lacking depth. Amrita Satapathy writes,

“Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni literally pulls her out of her husband's shadow and projects her as his equal and a powerful entity in her fascinating book.” Even though the narrative is from the woman's perspective it cannot be said that it is an overtly feminist account of Sita's life for it doesn't delve into other politics of domination and subjugation brought by the glorification of Ram's chastity and magnificence. However, it is certainly a tale of the marginalised, the forbidden, the invisible and the downtrodden who have been lurking at the margins of mythic narratives.

Devdutt Pattanaik's literary oeuvre is marked by deconstruction and a re-reading of existing literature to understand the queer representations that have existed for ages but is invisibilized and stigmatized with the onset of colonial modernity. His books like *Indian Mythology: Tales, Symbols, and Rituals from the Heart of the Subcontinent*, *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of Ramayana*, *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of Mahabharata*, *Shikhandi: and Other Queer Tales They Don't Tell You*, *The Girl Who Chose: A New Way of Narrating the Ramayana*, *Myth = Mithya: A Handbook of Hindu Mythology* and many more, continue to unsettle the existing perception of myths. Another fascinating novel that brilliantly engages in the retelling of the existing myth of Andal, who is the only female Alvar among the 12 Alvar saints of South India, is *Queen of Jasmine Country* by Sharanya Manivannan. Manivannan in her novel, takes up the challenge to re-imagine the transformation of Kodhai into Andal, the only woman among the twelve Alvars. The story anchors the ideas like love, devotion and reverence within the narrative. The story is a perfect blend of descriptive prose and poetic ruminations that reimagines the Andal myth. The setting of the story is 9th-century Tamil Nadu where a baby named Kodhai is born in a Tulsi grove and is later adopted by a Brahmin couple. Her father Vishnuchittan weaves garlands of tulsi and jasmine for the deity and sings his praises. When a young Kodhai is caught one day wearing the garland that is meant for the deity, she is rebuked by a horrified Vishnuchittan. But when Vishnu himself refuses to wear the garland unless she wears it first, Kodhai becomes his consort. But Kodhai is a lonely young woman and craves a man comparable to her god. In the hope of finding him, she observes the pavai nombu vow in the month of Margazhi, the rituals of which are described in the 30 verses of the Tiruppavai. Her prayers go unanswered and her desires slowly give way to frustration. Despite the difficult personality of Kodhai, the novel is able to succinctly lay bare the complexities in her novel. Undeniably brilliant in its resonances with the classical poetry, *Queen of Jasmine Country*, the novelist manages to imagine Andal, whose strong sublime personality continues to inspire and astonish us.

#### CONCLUSION:

There has always been a profound relationship between literature and mythology. From times immemorial, mythology with its thrilling twists, villainous evil acts, and the final victory of good over evil along with its freed kingdoms has been a perpetual source of inspiration to Indian writers and writers across countries. Despite the antiquity, Indian mythology continues to indelibly impress upon Indian writers in their choice of subjects, themes and plots. As Joseph Dorairaj in his book *Myth and Literature* (2003) rightly puts it, “Myths are uncanny phenomena. They are at once regional and yet universal; static and yet dynamic; stable and yet protean; archaic and yet contemporary; profligate and yet hallowed; fantastic and yet highly – structured; divine and yet human in that they are as much about gods and goddesses as about human beings.”, it reimagination becomes inevitable because of the fast-changing world and shifting contours within different cultures. The reinterpretation makes it more acceptable and provides a greater readership. The co-dependency of literature and myth not only presents the creative genius of the writers but also ascertains the importance of different signs and symbols deployed in the myths that continues to influence society.

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